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Book Review Essay: Sheila Rowbotham presents A Vindication of the Rights of Woman Rhiannon Cobb

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Book Review Essay: Sheila Rowbotham presents A Vindication of the Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft, M., & Rowbotham, S. (2019). *Sheila Rowbotham presents a vindication of the rights of woman*. New York, New York: Verso Books.

By Rhiannon Cobb¹

There may be no other field of study that has come in and out of favour as many times as feminism. Feminists have worn many hats, and many have worn the hat of feminism for disputable reasons. The first definition of feminism as ‘equality of the sexes’ has long been surpassed. But various later forms of feminism and the earlier share a core foundation: that theoretical conceptualizations of the human and equality are not congruent with lived experiences because of gendered social constructs that make some more equal than others. Another commonality at the foundation of feminism, I echo many others to say, is Mary Wollstonecraft.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman has been published in a new edition by Verso as part of its “Revolutions” book series. The series ranges from The Gospels of Jesus Christ to Fidel Castro’s 1960 Declarations of Havana. Yet Wollstonecraft’s text, published in 1792 is the only of the seventeen that is written by a woman. Each of the seventeen texts features an introduction by one of “today’s radical writers” (according to Verso). A Vindication also holds the title of the only text of the series introduced by a woman — the socialist historian and figure of the British women’s liberation movement Sheila Rowbotham.

Rowbotham precisely situates Wollstonecraft at the theoretical, historical, and political juncture in the 18th century, where Wollstonecraft perceived herself and which provided impetus for the feminist philosopher’s work. Rowbotham expertly charts those influenced by the text: both Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries whose scholarship she immediately impacted, and a long line who came after — as well as movements that have been shaped by Wollstonecraft’s ideas. These included but were not limited to Chartists (social reformists fighting for the rights of the working class in England), socialists, utopianists, and anarchists. Wollstonecraft’s thoughts echo in the literature of Elizabeth Browning, Jane Austen, and, one of her greatest admirers, Virginia Woolf, whose writings on the education of women doubtless found roots in Wollstonecraft’s Vindication.

Written at the height of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft’s words echo the urgent case for reason and rationality of her time as she makes her case for human rights rooted in universal morality. Touting virtuousness, Wollstonecraft makes the claim — at the time revolutionary though today commonplace — that gender should not be relevant to mental and intellectual strength, nor moral character. Wollstonecraft’s text is a polemic to the place of women in European society in the late 18th century, which she saw as subjugated, oppressed, docile props to society as wives and mothers.

The text’s solitary place in the series speaks to a larger issue in political thought, as political scientist Mary Hawkesworth grimly concludes in her 2010 study on the persistent exclusion of feminist and critical race theory within political theory. Hawkesworth notes that the two fields compose a “constitutive outside” to political theory and are “far easier to misrepresent and ignore” than to “engage with on their merits”, particularly where they “expose multiple fault lines to

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traditional approaches” (201, p. 693). In this way and others, Wollstonecraft’s analysis and confrontations with the “everyday assumptions” of patriarchy and their study remain necessary some 230 years after the text’s original publication (Rowbotham, p. xvii).

At least in form, Wollstonecraft can also be seen as paving a path for prominent feminist literary critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett. As Fiore Sireci notes (2018), the predominant methodology in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* is literary criticism. Wollstonecraft critiques the work John Milton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Gregory, (who’s *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* she describes equally “as ineffectual as absurd”) among many others, arguing that their writing is exemplary of how women’s identity is constructed and rationalized by men (Wollstonecraft, p. 39). A dedicated admirer of Rousseau’s theorizing, Wollstonecraft nonetheless found that his beliefs fell short of reason when it came to the education of women. She offered a scathing review of Rousseau’s views on the purpose of a woman’s education which he believed was to make, in her words, a “more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself” (of her response: “What nonsense!”) (p. 34).

Rousseau’s theories have been criticized for falling short in a myriad of other ways, namely their foundation in the reason of the Enlightenment period and the conundrum of natural human rights, and Wollstonecraft’s own theory stands critiqued in kind. Feminists after Wollstonecraft have pushed back against the eminence of rational thinking and “natural rights” formulated in the Enlightenment, critiquing the structure of this approach itself rather than critiquing who is permitted to participate in that structure, as Wollstonecraft did. Many feminists critique a separation between rationality and emotionality, a hierarchy between the two, and a universality in the moral grounds of either. Moreover, this essentialist and universal approach to rights and humanity overlooks the widely disparate contexts — whether they be related to gender, ethnicity, race or class - that forestall the practical possibility of a theoretical universality among women, and amongst genders (Norlock, 2019).

For Wollstonecraft, the oppression of women was deleterious not only to women, but to society as a whole. To educate women like men would uplift society by securing women’s roles as independent citizens. And while Wollstonecraft’s appeals to the end of this cause would hardly stand today, either — her reasoning that independence and education would make women “more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers” — the grounds of her argument echo in the grounds of feminism (Wollstonecraft, p. 204). Her insights that, “every profession, in which great subordination of rank constitutes its power, is highly injurious to morality”, and that the “science of politics is in its infancy” is “evident from philosophers scrupling to give the knowledge most useful to man that determinate distinction” remain timely and topical to the questioning of power that continues to inform the critical study of power and structures of oppression in the 21st century (p. 21; p. 49).

This new edition and its review are coincidentally timely. On November 10th of 2019, a statue dedicated to Mary Wollstonecraft was erected — the first statue that pays tribute to the feminist philosopher in the world, and a statue that represents the ‘Everywoman’, according to art critic Eleanor Nairne (2020). The statue features the figure of a naked woman, which many see as distastefully ironic given Wollstonecraft’s scorn for her society’s finding a woman’s worth only in their beauty. Nevermind that Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary thought was saved largely for middle-class women and overlooked those of the working class. Nor the statue’s seemingly Caucasian, cisgendered, and able-bodied form. Nonetheless, the statue’s place — though centuries late — among so many white male figures erected in stone for legacies far less commendable is cause for celebration.

Particularly with Rowbotham's introduction, the text remains of central importance to any who are interested in the history of feminism thought and its figureheads, and the many movements and theoretical factions it has influenced. The text may also provide a basis for those seeking to study and critique the Enlightenment from a feminist perspective, or to understand the impact of the French Revolution in Britain during the late 18th and early 19th century.

As Matilde Gonzalez has reasoned, Wollstonecraft's resonance today is not for her theoretical foundations in Enlightenment, but how she highlighted its weakness by speaking to the "division between social conventions and the immanent constituents of human subjectivity" that resonated long after the "idealistic echoes of the French Revolution had died away" (1997, p. 182). Long after indeed.

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